# *Joseph Nechvatal's Visionary Computer Virus*

by

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Saline Royale d'Arc-et-Senans and FRAC Franche-Comte, 1993

Joseph Nechvatal, *viral attaque: la CaRne* (1993) 200x300cm

There is a poignancy in these new computer virus paintings by Joseph Nechvatal that is rarely discussed; yet it is an essential aspect of their message. Embedded in his canvases, one may discover an authenticity that is disappearing, perhaps already forgotten. It is an authenticity about the structure of seeing images, an authenticity that is vanishing, folding in upon itself, as history is being sucked into time capsules and sound bites. Nechvatal's art has the capability to imply a transcendence into the spiritual galaxies of the mind - an ascendance that reaches far beyond the banalities of our strictly utilitarian, computerized society.

To speak of poignancy in relation to these canvases by Nechvatal is to suggest that they are immersed in feeling or that they are given to the metalanguage of visual poetry. They are "paintings" not so much about the history of art, as about a network of historical images. To feel something - a sensation, for instance - in relation to one of these grandiose image-works by Nechvatal is to become engaged in a special kind of experience. It is an experience directly related to the dense overlay of information that we perceive on a consistent basis. Yet instead of sensing frustration over the consumption of so many images, one might feel in Nechvatal's art a particular solace and harmony, an ability to flow into the stream of images, to let oneself become immersed, baptized, chastened. It might be compared to driving an automobile into a nightmarish fog where even the hood over the engine disappears. There is only the glowing windshield in front of one's eyes. The headlights depict a certain ambiance, a dispersal of imagery, where it is impossible to detect anything in particular. Yet the automobile continues to roar through the fog on a solitary highway at night. The direction is unknown, the visibility is scarce. Such an experience would naturally incite fear and trepidation, a sense of being lost in some unknown territory, caught in some relentless terror. There is another possibility, in fact. It is the possibility that the territory is not unknown, it is only forgotten, subjugated and repressed somewhere in the primal subconscious - the place where the mind used to travel, but has over the centuries forgotten its direction.

This new possibility is related to an infinite visuality - a type of seeing that depends on the intuition of the mind's eye - an intuition that does not fear the limitless boundaries of the image overlay, but instead, learns to accommodate the structure of their density. To experience these computer virus images is to conceptualize reality rather than to categorize it - to come to terms with the infrastructural basis of the image - the fluctuation and fluidity of the image - as if all images were a single constellation, a single repository without limits or constraints.

Given this condition of seeing, the mind is capable of traveling without fear and with a rejuvenated visual intuition at its sensory disposal. The mind travels through the eye, and again, back to the mind, as an infinite reverberation, contingent upon the consciousness of seeing and the recognition of its own thought processes.

These inextricably intertwining processes of seeing and thinking contribute directly to how the emotions are stirred. They are not stirred by hysteria or fear but by subtle passages, like music, like architecture, in fact, like the rhythmical staccato movement found in the buildings at Arc-et-Senans. For it goes without saying that Nechvatal has become acculturated by these buildings over the past three years and to the inexorably beautiful regions of the Jura - the gradual, bending hills where Claude-Nicolas Ledoux first envisioned his architectural fantasy over two centuries ago.

Nechvatal is fundamentally a conceptualist more than a simulationist; yet he implies in his computer viruses a poetry that is fully democratic, completely anti-autocratic. It is a metalanguage of the soul - a concept, by the way, also confused by leading postmodernists, especially in America. Nechvatal is an artist whose work needs to be seen, and considered beyond the boundaries of the computer terminal and beyond the theoretical limits of the postmodern. He is an imagist more than a painter, yet he is a major artist, an artist of supplemental stature, whose poetry ascends into the electronic network of images long forgotten, assiduously displaced. Indeed, there is something poignant in knowing that when the artist first visited Paris several years ago, he spent his evenings reading Deleuze and Guattari and his days at the Louvre studying the great paintings of David. This suggests that Nechvatal was intent upon inventing a new language of art through this conjugation of these experiences. It further suggests that he saw the need to re-introduce the romantic impulse back into art and into the excitement of image making and reflective thought. The computer virus paintings are the result of this venture.